



Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN)

Name of Site: Conflict Archive on the Internet
Author: Dr Martin Melaugh (Project Manager, CAIN Project)
URL: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html>
Type of site: NGO, online archive and database
Housed at: University of Ulster
Status at 17th December 2002: live

The CAIN project began in 1996, and the website was first established in 1997, and was designed to provide an archive of material relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland since 1968. The project has been based at the University of Ulster Magee campus in Derry (specifically at the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity [INCORE]). However, from 2000 the project has also been a constituent element of a wider effort to co-ordinate associated sites; the ARK website (Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/>) brings together several sites linked to the University of Ulster and Queen's University in Belfast, including the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey into social attitudes, an Online Research bank focused on social policy, and a site devoted to Northern Ireland Elections.

CAIN is now well-established as a resource for researchers and analysts of the conflict, with over half a million total 'hits' recorded in the access statistics for October 2002 (23,000 Home page 'hits'), and a wide range of users from around the world (the site states that 'approximately one third of users are from Britain and Ireland; one third from the USA; and one third from Europe and the rest of the world'). This is clearly a website that caters for the needs of the academic community, but it will also be an invaluable future resource for other, non-professional users of the net. The politics of Northern Ireland has been the subject of a great deal of mystification over the years, and this kind of resource will certainly help to demystify aspects of the conflict, and provide a factual basis for argument and interpretation.

In terms of design, the site is admirably clear and easily navigable. There are three main sections, containing crucial information on the 'Background to the Conflict', 'Key Events' and 'Key Issues'. In addition to this subject content, the site map provides a useful summary of the services offered by the site: there is guidance on search facilities, 'frequently asked questions', a gateway to potentially complementary resources, links to bibliographies and databases, notes for prospective contributors, and information for any user wishing to provide suggestions and feedback. In one or two cases, work remains ongoing (e.g. a directory of researchers is planned), but generally these services are regularly updated and appear to be designed with the genuine interests of users in mind.

The content itself consists largely of three types of material: first, material written and edited by members of the project team; second, articles contributed specifically for CAIN by external sources; and, third, material that has been previously published elsewhere. This reviewer formed, the admittedly impressionistic, view that there was significantly more of the first and third type of material, and relatively fewer pieces that had been specifically contributed for the CAIN site. However, the quality of the contributions from the 'internal' project team seemed very high.

As far as the 'Background' section is concerned, this includes extensive bibliographical databases, an updated chronology of political events in Northern Ireland (where recent speeches and statements can be accessed), and a stimulating collection of visual and graphical material (including photographs, maps, posters, murals and symbols) generated by the conflict. As well as the obviously political content, there are several

interesting databases devoted to Northern Irish society, and also cultural production associated with the 'Troubles' (film, television documentary, fiction). Several of these databases have been donated from individual collections; for example, Eamon Melaugh's archive of photographs spanning thirty years, or Peter Heathwood's research into television documentaries analysing Northern Ireland. The range and breadth of the site is striking, and there will undoubtedly be new and thought-provoking material to be unearthed, even for the experienced specialist.

The 'Key Events' section includes five areas that are considered critical (Civil Rights [1964-1972], Internment [1971-75], Ulster Workers' Council strike [1974], Hunger strikes [1980-81], and the evolving Peace Process [1988-present]), and a number of other events that are covered less extensively. The pages devoted to these 'key events' include summaries, a chronology, details of prominent organisations and key actors, as well as a specific bibliography and other resources. What is not entirely clear from the text is the precise rationale for choosing particular events as 'key', and also the decisions made with regard to periodisation. For instance, while no-one would dispute the significance of the Republican hunger strikes of 1980-81, it is certainly possible to argue that they could best be understood in terms of a cycle of prison protest that began in 1976, with the ending of special category status. Although this is apparent in the text, it would not be clear immediately. These 'key events' are described as 'turning-points' in the Troubles, but it is not always evident why other events could not also be described in similar fashion, and as of similar significance.

The 'Key Issues' refer to aspects of the political situation that have exercised politicians and general public throughout the course of the Troubles. Among those included are the administration of justice, children, discrimination, education, employment, housing, parades, policing, parties/elections and women. In several cases, these pages remain under construction, or the text is provided in draft form only, but nevertheless, this treatment of 'key issues' promises to be a valuable, if occasionally controversial, resource.

There is no doubt that the CAIN project represents one of the most influential web resources yet available for students of the politics of Northern Ireland, and it is likely to remain a vital teaching and research tool for many years to come.

Stephen Hopkins, University of Leicester, UK